



## Ohio Department of Veterans Services Presentation to the House Armed Services and Veterans Affairs Committee October 23, 2019

Chairman Perales, Vice Chair Hood, Ranking Member Weinstein and the entire House Armed Services and Veterans Affairs committee, thank you for inviting me here today to discuss the state of affairs in Ohio's veteran community.

I'm Debbie Ashenhurst. In 2015, I retired as a major general from the Army after 37 years of service, and this past January Gov. DeWine appointed me as Director of Veterans Services, a post I gladly accepted. While we aim to improve our reach and impact in many areas, some aspects of ODVS remain constant. One of them, of course, is our steadfast mission to provide opportunities and resources for our veteran community through advocacy, collaboration and partnerships. That does not waver. Our mission is to be the Trusted Voice for Veterans.

We operate two Ohio Veterans Homes (OVH), including one in Sandusky that is among the largest nursing care facilities in the country. The operations and upkeep of those two facilities constitute approximately 90% of the Department's budget. I would like to once again thank all of you for your support of that facility and the necessary budget increase the Homes received in this past budget.

Together, the Sandusky and Georgetown Homes fulfill a grateful state's promise to its sick, injured and aging veterans. The Veterans Home in Sandusky is not just a long-term care facility, though. It is also home for up to 200-plus veterans who live in the domiciliary, an option for those who don't require round-the-clock skilled nursing care.

Some of today's veterans suffer from Traumatic Brain Injury and dementia. We expect the need for the care that addresses these serious conditions to rise. Over the past several years, we have worked at the Homes to build the memory care wards needed to serve our veterans and fulfill our duty to bear that burden. On that note, I want to thank you in the House for the recent passage of Senate Bill 24 through your chamber. SB 24 will stand up the state's Alzheimer's and Dementia task force and I look forward to the Department of

***"The Trusted Voice for Veterans"***

Veteran Services doing its part in tackling the impact of these devastating diseases and ensuring our state's veterans are an integral part of Ohio's plans to address these diseases in the future.

Together, the two Homes provide care for up to 800 veterans, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. We all can be proud knowing that Ohioans' tax dollars are being spent on caring for our state's heroes in their time of need.

We also have put more time and resources into our Veterans Workforce Team, which is bridging gaps across Ohio for employers who wish to identify, hire and keep former service members. Ensuring businesses can find, hire and retain veterans is critical to a smooth transition to civilian life for our vets and we work hard to train every military friendly business on best hiring practices all across Ohio. Our team of three workforce experts constantly travel across the state to train businesses in your districts and offers instruction on how to best hire and retain veterans. We would be happy to connect them to any employer, public or private, large or small, in your district.

We initiate active outreach efforts to honor veterans and also conduct several ceremonies annually, including the Governor's Wreath-Laying to honor Ohioans killed in action, and our Ohio Veterans Hall of Fame Induction and Enshrinement that recognize the extraordinary things veterans do for our state after they leave the military. In fact, there are two members of that Hall of Fame in this committee right now, Chairman Perales and Representative Ghanbari. The Hall of Fame induction ceremony this year will take place on November 7<sup>th</sup> at Radiant Life Church in Dublin. Your offices have received invitations and notices if any of your constituents are among one the 20 veterans being inducted this year.

We administer the Ohio Veterans Bonus, which was approved by Ohio voters in 2008. This program was extended in the recent budget to continue into 2022.

In addition, Ohio law charges the Department with the responsibility to partner with county veteran service commissions and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in order to best connect veterans to the benefits and resources they have earned. We train and certify the 271 county veteran service officers across Ohio that act as caseworkers for any veteran in Ohio. Our office approves the 755 education institutions across the state that accept G.I. Bill. These county, state and federal investments in our veterans help create a stronger and more vibrant community for all Ohioans.

It is my privilege and honor to serve Ohio veterans and military families. With your continued commitment, our department can look forward to being properly equipped to

care for veterans at our state facilities, and to promote innovative education, workforce and healthcare initiatives that enrich veterans' lives and sustain Ohio's reputation as a national leader on veterans' issues.

Thank you for your time today. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.